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ABSTRACT

A group of about 200 students in Malmo, Sweden, was followed through three grades of elementary school (grades 4, 5, and 6) in order to observe the development of their composition writing skills. The project involved three problem areas. (1) "How does the written language develop and how is it viewed by judges?" The data gathered shows the changes which occurred in selected linguistic measurements. Productivity (length of essays, number of different words, etc.), which is an important sign of development, was found to have increased. It was also the characteristic to which observers attached the greatest importance. (2) "How can composition writing be stimulated?" Students were assigned essays, and the effects of the topics and certain instructions (about correct writing) on the children's creativity were analyzed. (3) "Do different student groups have different written language?" The differences between the sexes was greater in grade 6 than in grade 4. Girls were better than boys in all areas where the differences occurred. Girls were also far superior in terms of productivity. Differences between social classes were less pronounced. (CFM)

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November 1976

Current project

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Title of project: Composition at the middle level
of elementary school (FRIS)

Project no.: 204

In progress at: Department of Educational and
Psychological Research, Malmö School
of Education

Tutor: Ass. Prof. Ebbe Lindell

Project leader: Ann Martinsson. Ph.D.

Problems and aims

The project involves the study of three problem areas:

1. How does the written language develop and how is it viewed by judges?
2. How can composition writing be stimulated?
3. Do different student groups have different written languages?

Timetable and methods

A group of about 200 students in Malmö was followed throughout the three grades of the middle level of elementary school. Subjects were chosen with a particular view to studying social differences between student groups. Three school management areas in Malmö were selected to represent upper, middle and lower groups according to a social class quota. Eight collections of data were made to shed light on the problems referred to above. The timetable was as follows.

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<u>Time of study</u>	<u>Name of study</u>	<u>Purpose of study</u>
Autumn, grade 4	"At the Museum"	Free written composition as documentation for a study of linguistic development and for linguistic assessment, together with "At the Camping Site" in grade 6.
Spring, grade 4	Ability and language tests	Tests of such aptitudes as vocabulary, grammatical knowledge and sense of style.
	"Active writing	Questionnaire concerning students' attitudes to different working methods applied to free written composition.
Autumn, grade 5	"The Cat"	Free written composition, employing various means of stimulating the students.
Spring, grade 5	"The Children's Book"	Free written composition with variable stimulus, certain comparisons between the language of children and adults.
	"Writing in School"	Questionnaire concerning students attitudes to different "subjects" for free written composition.
Autumn, grade 6	Creativity tests	Tests exploring general and verbal creativity.
Spring, grade 6	"Near and Far"	Free written composition employing various means of stimulus.
	"At the Camping Site"	Free written composition as documentation for studies of linguistic development and for linguistic assessment, together with "At the Museum" in grade 4.

The investigations of differences between groups of students do not occupy any specific place in the timetable, because they have formed part of several of the other studies, e.g.

"At the Museum", "At the Camping Site" and the tests.

The language in the essays "At the Museum" and "At the Camping Site" was studied very closely. Among other things the linguistic analysis focussed on sentences and clauses of different kinds, parts of speech and syntax. Each individual word was analysed both lexicographically and syntactically. In principle each word was given an analysis distinguishing it from all the other words in the same sentence.

Results

1. How does the written language develop and how is it viewed by judges?

The linguistic analysis has made it possible to ascertain in greater detail how development proceeds and how language grows. The following table contains a selection of linguistic measurements and shows the changes occurring in those measurements between the writing of "At the Museum" and the writing of "At the Camping Site".

The figures in the table are averages for 191 students, 97 boys and 94 girls, who took part in all the experiments mentioned in the timetable. Percentages are not always appropriate in linguistic descriptions. Insofar as they have been used at all, they have been based on the number of words. Subordinate clauses, however, have been related to logical sentences.

Linguistic measurement	Average, grade 4	Average, grade 6	Percentage, grade 4	Percentage, grade 6
Number of words	131	221		
Different words	80	127		
Nouns	27	39	21	18
Proper nouns	5	4	4	2
Adjectives	4	9	3	4
Main verbs	20	31	15	14
Adverbs	16	30	12	14
Unusual words as per Allén's frequency rating	45	69	35	32
Unusual words as per Hassler-Göransson's frequency rating	40	59	31	27
Written sentences	12	19		
Logical sentences	17	27		
Length of written sentences	12,4	12,3		
Length of logical sentences	8,1	8,5		
Subordinate clauses	10	18	59	67
Punctuation marks	14	26	11	12
Word length	4,1	4,2		
Composite nouns	2	7	1	3

Essays become far longer in grade 6. If, therefore, length is to be equated with abundance of imagination and ideas, students write more productively in the senior of the two grades. There is also a distinct rise in the number of different words. If the number of different words is taken as indicative of the growth of vocabulary, developments go in the right direction in this respect too. Individual words also develop. They grow longer in the higher grade. This is partly due to a more considered choice of words, resulting in the use of less frequent words. In this way

written composition acquiesces a more exact content. Then again, students in the senior grade can cope more easily with the construction of composite words.

Nearly all other linguistic phenomena increase at the same time as length. All the parts of speech in the table score higher figures in grade 6. If instead one calculates the parts of speech as percentages of the number of continuous words, one finds that the proportion of nouns and main verbs (not auxiliary verbs) declines whereas the proportion of adjectives and adverbs rises.

The logical sentences, demarcated by the linguistic analysts without regard to the students' punctuation, increase slightly, while the written sentences, as demarcated by the students themselves, do not change in length. Perhaps this is because the students put more into their constructions, above all attributes, making their logical sentences longer. At the same time their punctuation improves, with the result that their written sentences become shorter.

Do observers value linguistic phenomena which, according to the development study, grow with increasing age?

The essay "At the Museum" was assessed, on a five-point scale by teachers and by creativity researchers.

The table below contains the same linguistic measurements as the previous one, but the grades have now been replaced with assessments. The figures 1-5 refer to ratings between 1-5 for five different essays. The observers were unanimous in their ratings of these essays.

Linguistic measurement	Essay with rating				
	1	2	3	4	5
Number of words	14	88	117	210	321
Different words	11	72	82	118	170
Nouns	4	13	37	36	70
Proper nouns	0	1	9	13	16
Adjectives	2	7	4	13	9

Linguistic measurement	Essay with rating				
	1	2	3	4	5
Main verbs	1	10	15	25	52
Adverbs	0	8	9	35	27
Unusual words as per Allén	7	38	55	63	111
Unusual words as per Hassler-Göransson	7	34	49	56	91
Written sentences	1	7	12	20	23
Logical sentences	1	9	14	22	40
Length of written sentences	14,0	12,6	9,7	10,5	14,0
Length of logical sentences	14,0	9,6	8,4	9,5	8,0
Subordinate clauses	1	7	9	17	24
Punctuation marks	0	7	12	28	21
Word length	4,1	3,9	4,1	4,1	4,1
Composite nouns	0	2	1	5	8

In the great majority of respects, the rise from low to high ratings tallies with the increases established between grade 4 and grade 6. In other words, the assessments move in the same direction as the students' development. Many of the linguistic measurements in the table are connected with the increasing length of the essays, which gives rise to a large number of nouns, adjectives, adverbs etc. Here again, length is the dominant characteristic of the essays.

In fact the most "uncertain" measurements in the table are those independent of length, viz length of written or logical sentences and word length. This brings us on to the results of the group as a whole. A selection of five students does not prove much; it can only serve as a useful example.

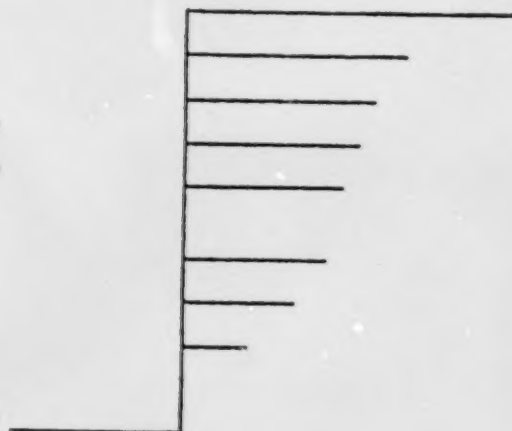
Moreover, it is an unwieldy procedure to operate with each individual linguistics phenomenon. Instead the measurements have been grouped according to their own natural relationships, and in grade 4 this grouping yielded ten factors. The following chart shows the correlation between individual

factors and the assessments, made of the students' essays.

Language factor

-30 -20 -10 0 +10 +20 +30 +40 +50

Length, productivity
 Adjective and complement
 Verb
 Adverbial modifier of time
 Length of logical sentence
 and subordinate clause
 Attribute
 Co-ordination
 Word length
 Relative clauses
 Length of written sentence



Once again the closest relation is that between assessment and length of essay. The relatively unimportant part played by other language factors is perhaps surprising, and it is also interesting to note that length of logical sentence is a positive characteristic while length of written sentence is a negative one.

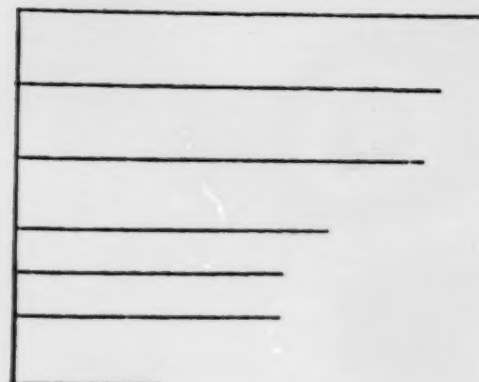
In grade 6 as well, there were ten factors closely resembling those in grade 4.

Correlation with assessment in grade 6

Language factor

-30 -20 -10 0 + 10 +20 +30 +40 +50 +60 +70

Length of descriptive
 language
 Length of narrative
 language
 Adjective and
 complement
 Adverb
 Relative clauses
 Length of sub-
 ordinate clauses
 Length of logical
 sentence and
 co-ordination



Language factor -30 -20 -10 0 +10 +20 +30 +40 +50 +60 +70

Word length

Verb

Length of written
sentence



Once again, productivity is the characteristic to which observers attach the greatest importance.

2. How can composition writing be stimulated?

As we saw earlier, increased productivity is an important sign of development, and essays with high productivity are appreciated by observers. It is therefore important to know how we can encourage students to write more. The elementary school curriculum mentions several different working methods applicable to written work.

An attitude test was constructed on the basis of 19 activities mentioned in the curriculum.

The three most popular activities were "writing a story out of your own imagination", "reading stories by other pupils in the class" and "writing a story about something which has really happened to you".

Thus students are fond of both imaginative and factual writing. It is perhaps surprising that they should also be so keen on reading each other's essays.

The three least popular activities are "making notes during a field trip or a radio programme", "writing a story that has to include special words" and "writing key words", i.e. activities connected with study technique.

Another questionnaire constructed in the course of the project focussed on the content of written work. The tasks were presented as essay subjects taken, among other things, from different school projects.

The three most popular subjects were "An exciting ghost story", "How I would like to furnish my room" and "The day I won the school competition", i.e. personal subjects. The least popular were "What my own dictionary would look like", "A visit to an art exhibition" and "From 8 to 5 at the typewriter". Otherwise the students reacted favourably to most of the subjects suggested.

In some cases boys and girls voted differently. The boys put a premium on technical and sporting subjects, the girls on social and verbal subjects.

This is what the students say they like and dislike. But what happens when actual experiments are conducted using different stimuli? Do any differences of productivity then occur between girls and boys?

An experiment in grade 5 during the autumn term has been given the general heading "The Cat". These essays were written in response to variable stimuli. The experiment was planned on the basis of analyses of the curricular activity questionnaire described above. These activities automatically fell into three groups: free, controlled and personal written composition. The dimension of factual or emotional direction was added. This resulted in the following experimental strategy.

Written tasks in the "Cat" experiment

	<u>Controlled</u>	<u>Free</u>	<u>Personal</u>
<u>Factual</u> (descriptive)	1. <u>Words</u> about appearance and food 31 students	3. <u>Pictures</u> showing appearance and food 33 students	5. <u>Text</u> : a diary about looking after a cat all by yourself 31 students
<u>Emotional</u> (narrative)	2. <u>Words</u> : positive and negative adjectives 29 students	4. <u>Pictures</u> : pretty kitten and predatory cat 32 students	6. <u>Text</u> : letter commenting experiments on cats 35 students

Lots were drawn to divide the children between the six fields. This led to all six "subjects" being distributed in each class, so that the individual teacher had less influence on the subjects and written composition was highly individual. Verbal tests were used to check that the six groups of students were equally placed, so that any differences in the results of the written work could be attributed to differences in the degree of stimulus afforded by the subjects.

We did not require the assistance of judges to find out what happened during the experiment. As has already been shown, objectively counted linguistic phenomena - linguistic measurements - are just as reliable. Both the student development study and the investigation of points focussed on by the judges had shown the number of different words to be one of the most important measurements of language. The number of different words yielded the following results in the groups receiving the various stimuli.

No. different words: "The Cat"

	Controlled	Free	Personal	Total
Factual	76	78	90	91
Emotional	87	93	57	78
Total	82	85	72	80

The numbers of words rise from left to right and from top to bottom, with the conspicuous exception of field 6. The children in this group were asked to comment on the vivisection of cats. Perhaps our attempt here to come up with a really compelling subject went too far. At a conference afterwards, the teachers reported that a number of students had been worried by this task and had professed themselves unable to write anything. The other two emotional subjects worked very well, and the factual but personal task of keeping a diary about looking after a cat also aroused a great deal of interest. More factual subjects, such as

history, geography and science, had more meagre results.

The subjects for the "Children's Book" experiment were taken from popular children's books. Each student was given a small "book" to write in. There was a title on the front page, the student was his or her own author, and there was a small frame containing a blurb.

Six subjects were presented in this way. They are listed below, together with the titles of the children's books to which they were related. It should be noted that the children were never given the "real" texts to read during the experiment.

<u>"Title" of essay</u>	<u>Description of contents</u>	<u>Titles of comparative texts</u>
1. The Wonderful Rescue	This is a book about saving a friend who is in great danger	Gripe, M. Pappa Pellerins dotter Wikström, O. Stå på dig Sverre
2. A Day at the Zoo	This is a book about a tour at a zoo	Linde, G. Med Lill-Klas i kappsäcken Sjöstrand, I. Kalle Vrångeback
3. An imaginary Friend	This is a book about what you want a friend to be like	Wikström, O. Sverre vill inte gå hem Falk, A.M. Barbro finner en ö
4. An Evening at the Fun Fair	This is a book about things you can do at a fun fair	Hellberg, H.E. Jan och Ann- Charlotta får en idé Petterson, H. Bara Lise-Lott
5. An Exciting Competition	This is a book about a competition with an unexpected result	Hammenhög, W. På stadion Inger, N. Piglet Ek
6. Plans for Running Away	This is a book about somebody who is thinking of running away from home	Ekervald, G.G. Flippen rymmer Falk, A.M. Barbro finner en ö

The experiment was conducted in grade 5 during the spring term. The children formed the same groups as in the "Cat" experiment, with the result that all six subjects were given to each class, and written work was completely individualized.

The results of the experiment were appraised using the same measurements as for "The Cat". This time there is no division into fields; the subjects are stated consecutively.

No. different words in "The Children's Book"

The Wonderful Rescue	146
A Day at the Zoo	134
An Imaginary Friend	109
An Evening at the Fun Fair	134
An Exciting Competition	132
Plans for Running Away	137

"An Imaginary Friend" is the only subject which differs from "The Wonderful Rescue". Judging by productivity, it is a far more difficult subject to write about.

In the "Near and Far" experiment, subjects were grouped into three levels, termed near, in between, and far. "Near" referred to an event which it was imagined could occur in the child's own home. "In-between" was meant to refer to an event still set on earth, while "Far" was to be an event that was not subject to terrestrial laws and circumstances. All three subjects, however, are both imaginative and personal; see below.

The instructions given were of two kinds and were in the form of "good advice" to the students. We hoped that one of these instructions, emphasizing handwriting, spelling and punctuation, would elicit grammatically correct writing. We were particularly interested to see whether an instruction of this kind would inhibit the students. The other

instruction was presumed to encourage creative writing and included such words as "many", "different" and "unusual".

Three subjects times two instructions makes six writing situations as per the following plan.

<u>Subjects</u>	<u>Near:</u>	<u>In-between:</u>	<u>Far:</u>
	How I saved the situation when our house was snowed in	How I saved the situation when we were shipwrecked on a desert island	How I saved the situation when we were marooned on another planet
Instructions aiming at			
<u>Correct</u> writing	1	3	5
<u>Creative</u> writing	2	4	6

The student groups were the same as in the first experiment, "The Cat". As with that experiment, figures are given here for the number of different words in their places in the six fields.

No. different words in "Near and far"

	<u>Near</u>	<u>In-between</u>	<u>Far</u>	<u>Total</u>
Correct	132	137	133	134
Creative	131	143	140	138
Total	131	140	137	136

There were no differences. Thus an instruction about correct writing did not inhibit the student's creativity. Nor was anything gained by seeking more remote, exclusive subjects.

Do different student groups have different written languages? Do boys and girls use the same language?

The measurements used in the studies of linguistic development and of the linguistic assessment of the essays can also be used to study differences between the sexes. Two measurements - proper nouns and composite nouns - are not

included in the calculations.

Linguistic measurement	Grade 4			Grade 6		
	At the museum	Reliable difference		At the Camping Site	Reliable difference	
	Boys	Girls		Boys	Girls	
Number of words	121	141	x	190	253	xx
Different words	76	84	x	112	143	xx
Nouns	26	28	-	35	44	xx
Adjectives	3	5	xx	7	11	xx
Main verbs	18	21	x	27	34	xx
Adverbs	15	18	xx	26	35	xx
Unusual words as per Allén	44	46	-	61	78	-
Unusual words as per Hassler-Göransson	40	40	-	55	65	xx
Written sentences	11	13	x	16	22	xx
Logical sentences	16	18	-	23	31	xx
Length of written sentences	13,1	11,7	-	12,8	11,9	-
Length of logical sentences	8,1	8,1	-	8,5	8,6	-
Subordinate classes	9	11	xx	15	20	xx
Punctuation marks	12	15	x	22	31	xx
Word length	4,1	4,0	-	4,2	4,2	-

The overwhelming impression given by this table is that the differences between the sexes are greater in grade 6 than in grade 4. What is more, the girls are better than the boys in all respects where differences exist.

It can be worth while investigating whether the differences between the sexes still remain if the proportions of different linguistic phenomena are calculated instead. This calculation results in the following table.

Linguistic measurements	Grade 4			Grade 6		Reliable difference
	At the museum	Reliable difference	At the Camping Site			
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls		
Nouns	22	20	-	18	17	-
Adjectives	2,7	3,1	-	3,7	4,3	x
Main verbs	15	15	-	14	14	-
Adverbs	12	13	-	14	14	-
Unusual words as per Allén	36	33	xx	32	31	-
Unusual words as per Hassler-Göransson	32	28	xx	28	26	xx
Punctuation marks	11	11	-	11	12	-

As can be seen, there is no great difference between boys and girls regarding the proportions of their language. On the other hand the girls were far superior in terms of productivity. In a word, boys and girls have the same language but the girls have much more of it.

We also inquired whether the social classes used the same language.

The pupils were socially classed in terms of their parents' occupations, and social groups were defined in accordance with principles commonly practised in Sweden.

The same measures of language as were used in the study of differences between the sexes were used for this study of differences between social classes. The results are presented in two tables, one for grade 4 and one for grade 6.

Linguistic measurements	Grade 4, At the Museum				Reliable difference
	I	IIA	IIB	III	
Number of words	153	133	123	116	x
Different words	92	82	76	72	xx
Nouns	32	27	26	24	x
Adjectives	5	4	4	3	-
Main verbs	22	20	18	18	-
Adverbs	19	17	15	15	-
Unusual words as per Allén	52	45	42	40	-
Unusual words as per Hassler-Göransson	47	40	37	34	x

Written sentences	13	12	12	12	-
Logical sentences	18	18	16	16	-
Length of written sentences	13,0	13,0	12,5	10,7	-
Length of logical sentences	8,6	8,0	8,0	7,9	-
Subordinate clauses	12	10	9	9	xx
Punctuation marks	16	14	12	14	-
Word length	4,1	4,0	4,0	4,1	-

Comparing this with the differences already described between grades and the sexes, one finds that differences between social classes are less pronounced.

It has sometimes been said that school increases any pre-existent social differences. One can obtain a view of this question by following the students to grade 6 and seeing how they get on.

Linguistic measurements	Grade 6, At the Camping Site				Reliable difference
	I	IIA	IIB	III	
Number of words	229	239	209	213	-
Different words	135	135	120	121	-
Nouns	42	43	36	8	-
Adjectives	10	9	8	8	-
Main verbs	31	34	30	28	-
Adverbs	32	32	28	30	-
Unusual words as per Allén	74	75	65	64	-
Unusual words as per Hassler-Göransson	64	65	55	54	x
Written sentences	20	19	19	19	-
Logical sentences	27	28	26	27	-
Length of written sentences	12,0	13,2	11,9	12,3	-
Length of logical sentences	8,8	8,8	8,4	8,2	-
Subordinate clauses	18	20	16	16	-
Punctuation marks	30	25	25	26	-
Word length	4,3	4,2	4,2	4,1	x

The great majority of the reliable differences have disappeared. Thus it is mainly the linguistic measurements indicative of productivity that lead to differences, insofar as differences exist. One can therefore ask the same question here as was asked concerning the comparison between the sexes. Do the social classes differ with regard to the proportions of different linguistic phenomena in their written work?

This question is answered by the following two tables

Linguistic measurements	Grade 4, At the Museum				Reliable difference
	I	IIA	IIB	III	
Nouns	22	20	22	20	-
Adjectives	3	3	3	3	-
Main verbs	14	15	15	16	-
Adverbs	12	13	12	13	-
Unusual words as per Allén	34	33	35	35	-
Unusual words as per Hassler-Göransson	31	30	31	30	-
Punctuation marks	11	11	10	12	x

Linguistic measurements	Grade 6, At the Camping Site				Reliable difference
	I	IIA	IIB	III	
Nouns	13	18	18	18	-
Adjectives	4	4	4	4	-
Main verbs	14	14	14	14	-
Adverbs	14	14	13	14	-
Unusual words as per Allén	32	31	32	31	-
Unusual words as per Hassler-Göransson	28	27	27	26	-
Punctuation marks	13	11	12	12	x

These results could be commented on in much the same way as those concerning differences between the sexes; children from different social classes use the same language. In grade 4, however, children from social class I are more productive than children from social class III, but this difference does not persist until grade 6.

References (in Swedish only)

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